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Between Utopia and Reality – Can We Make Inclusion in Society Happen?

Abstract
As an idea centered around the benefits of diversity, plurality, and the heterogeneous nature of humanity, inclusion radically cuts ties with the belief that there is a way of being, a way of thinking or living perhaps, that is "normal" or "normative" for everyone or anyone. But it brings with it the problem of bridging the gap between a utopian idea and reality: how can society become inclusive without assuming an in/out binary? How can we implement an idea we have to think of as already in place? And how could this lead to a society devoid of supremacist thinking and negative normativity? This article offers a biographical approach to inclusion that is reflected in a practical theological way to promote an inclusive epistemology.

Laying out the Problem

"Between Utopia and Reality – Can we Make Inclusion in Society Happen?" seems to be a straightforward question. It is answerable in three possible ways: yes, no, and maybe.[1] On closer inspection, however, it gets exponentially more difficult, as its answer has many layers. There are few questions that touch on so many disciplines, topics and issues like inclusion does: heterogeneity, diversity and integration, intersectionality, interconnectedness and interdependence[2], egoism and altruism, narrativity, violence, sociology and law, minority, embodiment, dis-ability, feminism, and the consequences of all the insights these can offer about inclusion for (religious) education and pedagogy. It seems difficult to figure out where to begin, how to sensibly sort through it all, not forget anything important and write something substantial, while also producing something readable. Still, I would strongly argue that this task is worth it, as I agree with HyeRan Kim-Cragg's premise that thinking outside your own academical box is good practice and a way to facilitate development in the practical theological field.[3] So maybe we should start with a breakdown of the fundamentals. What do I mean when I say inclusion, should I of all people talk about it and if so, in what way can I talk about it to further its discourse?

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1   "Yes, no, maybe, I don't know. Can you repeat the question?" – Malcolm in the Middle.
2   On the problems and chances of interconnectedness and interdependence, see HyeRan Kim-Cragg, *Interdependence. A Postcolonial Feminist Practical Theology* (Eugene, OR 2018).
3   See Kim-Cragg, *Interdependence*, 3: "A more robust interdependent multi-disciplinary engagement is necessary for the good of academia, but is also much needed for current theological education and ecclesial realities."

A Biographical Detour

Not knowing what I was reflecting on was actually inclusion, I first came in contact with the issue when my grandmother had an accident. She slipped and hit her head on a bathroom sink while recovering from an emergency surgery at the hospital. I still don't know who gave her permission to leave the bed and how she ended up hurt and alone on the floor with no nurse in sight. Bleeding intracranially and fading in and out of consciousness, she was rushed into surgery to relieve the pressure on her brain. After nine weeks in an artificially induced coma to help her heal, she could not regain consciousness on her own and was diagnosed with having Unresponsive Wakefulness Syndrome (UWS).[4]

During those first weeks there was no chance to take a breath and think. It was hectic and chaotic and life and death all the time, and we, my family and I, were swept away by the events. This was probably one reason why we never actively decided anything about her care or if we wanted to, euphemistically spoken, help her "go". The other was that nobody asked us about it. There was nothing to unplug and nobody saw any of the consequences coming. Her heart and lungs worked fine and she was being cared for by professionals. In hindsight I am very grateful: we were overwhelmed by a situation that took us off guard and we were not equipped to understand any of it fully. Even if we had made a life ending decision, which I assume we would not have, it would not have been an informed and well reflected one.

After her hospital stay and a very short rehabilitation phase, we tried to figure out the best way to look after her, so we started a shared apartment with two other persons affected by UWS, splitting the rent and the cost for around the clock care and therapy for all three with the other families. I learned about UWS and how to attend to my grandmother from her care professionals, who were specially trained nurses. I visited her every day for a few hours and discovered a completely different, but also a joyful and fulfilling new relationship with her.

While I think this was the best way for her and the others to live, be happy and be active to the best of their abilities, this was my first close contact with persons with multiple and severe disabilities. I naively thought having these kinds of challenges in a country equipped with a sturdy and well functioning social system[5] would pose no bigger problem. Instead, I encountered a kind of covert systemic discrimination I had not noticed in my country before – maybe because I was privileged in a way or because I came upon it in a situation were I felt a new responsibility, standing in the stead of another person who needed me to fight her battles: battles against properly trained doctors and nurses in hospitals who, despite their extensive medical training, did

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4   Most people know this condition under PVS, Persistent/Permanent Vegetative State. I use Unresponsive Wakefulness Syndrome instead, because I think this name is problematic at best, as the persons affected by it are wakeful, if not conscious, can sometimes regain their full consciousness (and are, thus, not affected permanently) and have more than just vegetative brain functions. They are not "vegetables", as some people in the medical field are calling them. Naming something properly and with care matters immensely and makes a huge difference in public perception – see, for example, Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech. A Politics of the Performative* (New York, NY/London 1997) or Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God. Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville, TN 1994), 25-29.

5   Germany mandates all its citizens to have health and care insurance. Simply put, half is paid by your employer and the other half is deducted together with your monthly income tax. The insurance companies get the bills directly from physicians, care product suppliers, outpatient and home care professionals, etc. and pay them. There is a nationwide list of what has to be covered by insurance, but there is also a gray area in which the insurers can make decisions on the go, based on eligibility, the severity of your condition and your social and financial situation.

not know how to attend to her properly and who communicated that in their eyes her life was not worth living any more and that she was a waste of their effort. Battles against insurance companies that sent out a "declined" notice as a standard first reaction every time you needed something that was not on their approved list. And battles against family members who spoke openly about how my grandmother had better died after her accident, all of this while she was in the room, hearing them and visibly registering what they said.

Every time we left the house we were confronted with newfound accessibility issues or with bewildered, nosy and disapproving stares by people willing to give their unwarranted and unwanted opinion about us and the situation we were in. One of the big disappointments was the pastoral care system: my grandmother's parish had no room for her presence or any of her (quite simple) needs. Apart from offering her the last rites, which we declined to not confuse her with the (wrong) impression that she was seriously ill or dying, they had no idea how to support a previously very active catholic woman, who happened to be impaired in some ways.

I would definitely not describe her life as normal or easy, or "just different". If I could make a wish, I would, like Nancy Mairs similarly wrote about her Multiple Sclerosis[6], change it all in a heartbeat. But, being deeply involved in her care and discovering what she was still able to do, I would not have dared to judge if she was better off dead or called her a burden to society. It angered me deeply when I discovered how unprepared my community was to provide for all of its members and to perceive them as equally important. My grandmother had been (and stayed) a person whom I loved unconditionally and she was not some kind of ethical dilemma to be solved one way or the other. I wish society and church had thought and acted a lot more in this way.

It wasn't until some years later, during my first semester as a research assistant, that I was confronted with inclusion as a practical theological topic. I had to co-teach a university course entitled "Inclusive Religious Education" and during my preparation I came upon the first book that connected my previous experiences with a theological side to them: Nancy Eiesland's "The Disabled God".

Aside from its great theological concepts, what was new to me was how Eiesland conveyed and also reflected her personal experiences to gain theological insight. This brings me to my first conclusion: while the narration of a biographical and thus personal approach to inclusion can hopefully also provide other people with an access to the topic and with an idea about its pitfalls, these experiences and how they are disclosed have to be consciously reflected to have further scientific and practical theological value. This is what I try to achieve with the second part of this article, which will provide a look at Nancy Eiesland's liberatory theology of disability, a contextualization of inclusion in Germany, an analysis of inclusion as a primarily utopian idea that still has the ability to become a reality, and my practical theological thoughts on an inclusive epistemology.

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6   Nancy Mairs, *On being a Cripple* (Tucson, AZ/London 1986), 13: "All the same, if a cure were found, would I take it? In a minute. I may be a cripple, but I'm only occasionally a loony and never a saint. Anyway, in my brand of theology God doesn't give bonus points for a limp. I'd take a cure; I just don't need one. A friend who also has MS startled me once by asking, 'Do you ever say to yourself, 'Why me, Lord?'' 'No, Michael, I don't,' I told him, 'because whenever I try, the only response I can think of is 'Why not?'' If I could make a cosmic deal, whom would I put in my place? What in my life would I give up in exchange for sound limbs and a thrilling rush of energy? No one. Nothing. I might as well do the job myself. Now that I'm getting the hang of it."

A Liberatory Theology of Disability

Nancy Eiesland categorizes her work as a stepping stone toward a liberatory theology of disability. Recognizing her own unique role as a theologian, woman and person with disabilities[7] she feels compelled to talk about these experiences. She writes about how the christological re-symbolization of the resurrected Christ as disabled God is something very powerful. It means a different way of representation for all of humankind and in particular for persons with disabilities. The resurrected Christ is only recognized because he is "damaged" and not perfect anymore. This systematical and biblical theological discovery brings practical (and practical theological) consequences and challenges with it, namely "to acknowledge our complicity with the inhumane views and treatment related to people with disabilities, and to uncover this hidden history and to make it available for contemporary reflection."[8]

Eiesland's book is an example of the transformative impact liberation theology had on theological thinking after the seventies. The idea behind liberation theology was that to identify and reverse cycles of fatality and passivity and to gain empowerment, you had to look at the concrete and personal experiences behind these structures and reflect on them.[9] This is what Eiesland does in her book: she uses her own experience and the experience of people in similar situations,[10] narrates them and offers a speaking center, reflects them, develops her own theology based on her newfound insights, and ultimately tries to bring about necessary changes in church and society. This is not surprising, as she studied theology at Candler School of Theology at Emory university and one of her teachers was Rebecca Chopp. She got her into advocating for the disabled, after Eiesland remarked that for all Christianity's professed concern for the poor and oppressed, the disabled were ignored.[11] "Rebecca Chopp brought feminist perspectives into dialogue with liberation theology […]. She noted that narrative practices (focused storytelling using a range of resources) were the ones that seemed most able to spark intellectual engagement, generate theological competencies and evidence the social relevance of Christian believing."[12]

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7   Nancy Eiesland, *Encountering the Disabled God*, Bible in Transmission Spring (2004), 4: "[H]aving been disabled from birth, I came to believe that in heaven I would be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God. My disability has taught me who I am and who God is. What would it mean to be without this knowledge? […] The theology that I heard was inadequate to my experience."

8   Ibid., 4.

9   This is as short a description of liberation theory I could provide, which cannot do this subject fully justice. Hopefully, it still provides enough context for this article. For the connection between liberation theology and its impact on the theological writing process see Heather Walton, *Writing Methods in Theological Reflection* (London 2014), xviii-xx.

10 Especially Dianne DeVries, a woman born without limbs, and Nancy Mairs, an author who has Multiple Sclerosis. Both have a very special and interesting understanding of their own bodies. For more see Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 31-46.

11 See Douglas Martin, *Nancy Eiesland is Dead at 44. Wrote of a Disabled God*, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/22/us/22eiesland.html: "She became a student at Candler, where she studied theology under Ms. Chopp. Ms. Chopp remembered Ms. Eiesland's complaining that for all Christianity's professed concern for the poor and oppressed, the disabled were ignored. I looked at her and said, 'That is your work,' Ms. Chopp said. After a stunned silence, Ms. Eiesland accepted the challenge as fodder for a master's thesis, which evolved into 'The Disabled God.' She earned her master's degree in 1991 and her Ph.D. in 1995, both from Emory."

12 Walton, *Writing Methods*, xviii-xix.

After setting the ground rules about her research method and the term "disability", Nancy Eiesland writes about the historical development of the disability rights movement in the USA, the relationship between the church and people with disabilities and the "disabling theology"[13] at its core, and she imagines a new understanding of body and embodiment. The second chapter, "Bodies of Knowledge", is about the experiences of Dianne DeVries and Nancy Mairs. Here, Eiesland tries to provide their insider's perspective. How they talked about themselves and their bodies especially stands out:

> *Tugging at the fringes of my consciousness always is the terror that people are kind to me only because I'm a cripple. My mother almost shattered me once, with that instinct mothers have blind, I think, in this case, but unerring nonetheless – for striking blows along the fault-lines of their children's hearts, by telling me, in an attack on my selfishness, 'We all have to make allowances for you, of course, because of the way you are.' […] I felt my worst fear, suddenly realized. I could bear being called selfish: I am. But I couldn't bear the corroboration that those around me were doing in fact what I'd always suspected them of doing, professing fondness while silently putting up with me because of the way I am. A cripple. […] Along with this fear that people are secretly accepting shoddy goods comes a relentless pressure to please – to prove myself worth the burdens I impose, I guess, or to build a substantial account of goodwill against which I may write drafts in times of need. Part of the pressure arises from social expectations. In our society, anyone who deviates from the norm had better find some way to compensate. Like fat people, who are expected to be jolly, cripples must bear their lot meekly and cheerfully. A grumpy cripple isn't playing by the rules. And much of the pressure is self-generated. Early on I vowed that, if I had to have MS, by God I was going to do it well. This is a class act, ladies and gentlemen. No tears, no recriminations, no faintheartedness.*[14]

What I found most interesting is the fact that all three of them, Nancy Eiesland as the author of the book and her two witnesses, Dianne DeVries and Nancy Mairs, are truly "*bodies as testimony* – bodies practicing marturia, the bearing of public witness, even at risky costs."[15] They use their voice and especially their bodies to reveal their situation. They lay claim to the right to speak out, and they show how their own view on things takes precedence over any outside view on them. They demand the change they need, and if they are not heard or if language fails in their accounting of suffering and salvation, they let their bodies speak by simply being.[16] This is what I would call the essence of inclusion: Speaking out and being seen, practicing marturia, is enough to bring about existential change and make a difference for yourself and others.

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13 Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 70.
14 Mairs, *On being a Cripple*, 8.
15 Mai-Anh Le Tran, *Reset the Heart. Unlearning Violence, Relearning Hope* (Nashville, TN 2017), 16. Emphasis in original text, contains Footnote 35: "For religious education, we consider bodies as public paedagogies – bodies as means of explicit and implicit public instruction."
16 See Ibid., 19.

Inclusion in Germany

Following this premise, an inclusive society would be one equipped to provide for all of its members, one that actually considers them to be equal. This does sometimes mean treating all of them exactly in the same way and other times considering what they need beyond that equal treatment and providing them with it. When people (and by extension, society as a whole) start measuring the worth of one citizen against another by some sort of standard, you have a humanitarian problem on your hands. It does not matter which standard: in the case of my grandmother, it was her lacking productivity for society. She was worth nothing because she could produce nothing. Worse, she was also costing society money, resources, time and labor, as society had to care for her and she had seemingly nothing to offer in return. But this obscure standard could as well be a different one, like the superiority of one race over another, or one religion over another. As a theologian I would argue that we cannot connect a person's worth or dignity to his/her productiveness, race or religion. One human being cannot be worth more than, or be superior to, another. What makes us human and therefore equal has to be something different, something non-negotiable you cannot attach any kind of value to or size up.

Still, we Germans know this mindset all too well and the consequences in our nation's history were devastating for the whole of humanity. White normativity may not be a term frequently used in German mainstream media. I would also venture a guess and say that it is not a term widely used by the German population, as it has no colloquial German counterpart and there is no good and short translation. Nevertheless, the idea behind it is not unknown in this country: right-wing nationalist tendencies, xenophobia, an undefined fear of the other, the unknown, the unfamiliar, are not only a phenomenon of the thirties and forties and therefore of times long past, they are also present to this day and part of an ongoing and existential debate in our society.[17] I absolutely agree that we have an "intractable problem of white normativity, white privilege, and intolerance of 'the other'".[18]

Inclusion is my idea of loosing especially the systemic aspect behind this and introducing a new system of tolerance, that enjoys, values and celebrates diversity. Spread the "privilege" equally among all human beings by creating and nurturing the ability to relate to everyone's narrative. This is why I am relieved that inclusion is also heavily discussed in Germany at the moment.[19] In the way the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UN CRPD) demands it especially for the educational field but also for society as a whole, it is a new idea centered around the benefits of diversity, plurality, and the overall heterogeneous nature of humanity. It radically cuts ties with the belief that there is something – a way of being, a way of thinking, a way of living perhaps – that is "normal" or "normative" for everyone or anyone. This is the main ambition of inclusion in Germany and this is expressed in the German phrase: Es ist normal, anders zu sein.[20]

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17 As I am writing this article there is a big discussion on the national news about a right-wing mob in Chemnitz that supposedly chased refugees down the street and threw stones on a Jewish restaurant owner. This caused a nationwide counter movement, rallied under #wirsindmehr [#wearemore – SR], that organized a charity concert and demonstrations to protest against the nationalists. Unfortunately, the situation is far from over as feelings on all sides run high.

18 See https://religiouseducation.net/rea2018/.

19 This was mainly fueled by a debate about the inclusiveness of our school system that, in most German federal states, separates kids with special educational needs into special schools with mixed ability classes. Since then, it has developed into a much broader discussion.

20   It is normal to be different.

Maybe not the chronological beginning, but definitely the start for a particularly German debate about inclusion are our societal basics. The foundations for it are already there, written down in the German constitution, which states in its first article that "[h]uman dignity shall be inviolable. To respect and protect it shall be the duty of all state authority. The German people therefore acknowledge inviolable and inalienable human rights as the basis of every community, of peace and of justice in the world."[21] In short: every human being has the same dignity, which guarantees them all the basic fundamental rights (listed in article 2-19) as inviolable and inalienable human rights. These are, for example, the right to free development of personality, the right to life and physical integrity, the right to be equal before the law, the right to freedom of faith and of conscience, of expression, arts and sciences, the right of assembly, of association and of movement, the right to property and the inviolability of the home. All these are founded on article one. Especially interesting to note for the context of inclusion is article three: "All persons shall be equal before the law. Men and women shall have equal rights. The state shall promote the actual implementation of equal rights for women and men and take steps to eliminate disadvantages that now exist. No person shall be favored or disfavored because of sex, parentage, race, language, homeland and origin, faith, or religious or political opinions. No person shall be disfavored because of disability."[22]

The Gap Between Utopia and Reality
From the way these most fundamental laws are drafted one can deduce their inherent cardinal problem: if what was written down here was a positive reality, nobody would bother making them into law. In contrast to this utopian (and inclusive) ideal, where everybody participates maybe not in the same way but by the same degree, the reality is different. People are treated and considered differently especially because of their gender, parentage, race, language, home country, origin, faith, religious or political view, or because of their dis-abilities. We have a society that puts up boundaries inside of itself and lets certain people participate and be heard, while others are silenced and frequently ignored in the societal narrative. A just society would instead promote the equal opportunity for everybody to participate.

Germany tried to enforce closing this gap between reality and utopia by ratifying and implementing the UN-CRPD, accompanied by a complete overhaul of its code of social law.[23] This was a necessary step, because if a society is based on a constitutional right that grants everyone the same human dignity, it has to see to it that everyone has equivalent conditions and chances in life. Such a society has what I would call "inclusive roots" and would indeed be a society devoid of supremacist thinking or any kind of negative normativity.

As good as such an inclusive society sounds, its implementation does not come without problems. One critique, for instance, is that you have these well-intentioned acts that are supposed to help people participate. Imagine, for example, the building a ramp at the entrance of a government building, or the translation of a TV program into sign language. Do these acts make society more inclusive? Yes and no: while these are all good things to do as they break down physical, communicational and clearly separative barriers (and thus help with participation and diversity), I would debate whether a theoretical guy in a wheelchair participates more in

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21 Art. 1, §1-2 GG, http://germanlawarchive.iuscomp.org/?p=212. The German constitution is called "Grundgesetz", which roughly translates as "Basic Law" or "Fundamental Law".
22 Art. 3, §1-3 GG, http://germanlawarchive.iuscomp.org/?p=212.
23 Especially book 9, entitled "Rehabilitation and Participation of Persons with Disabilities".

society just because he can physically be where he could not be before. Especially if this is a scenario where nobody asked him what he needed, and just guessed.

Again, ramps and translators are a good thing, but this is not enough to be inclusive, as it offers no remedy against questions like: "How much help is too much? Is this too expensive? How many people must benefit from this help for it to be worth it? Who will get help and who will not?" Ultimately, who gets to say what is done to help the theoretical guy in a wheelchair is really not the guy in the wheelchair. In a truly inclusive society, he would be. He would be the expert to ask and he would be in the (also theoretical) "ramp committee". His opinion would matter over that of people not in wheelchairs. This is the difference between outside help, charity and real participation: participation gives you the right to such things while help and charity offer you no say in the matter.

By that definition you are excluded from society and unable to truly participate if you are invisible and/or unable to speak; if you are not seen and heard. Think back to wheelchair guy for a moment: he truly participates, if someone recognizes him as a person whose needs matter, and asks him about them. If he says he needs a ramp, he should then be asked how steep it has to be built and if it should have a railing to use it more comfortably.[24] Better yet: he is able to initiate this process himself and then gets what he needs. He is a vital part of the decision making process. If others decide for him and his opinion doesn't matter, he is excluded. He is out.

In an inclusive society, this has to be impossible. It has to be guaranteed that nobody can fall through the cracks that way. Everybody has the right to speak (active) and be heard (passive) and be there (active) and be seen (passive). It is evident, even on a grammatical level, that inclusion has to be relational. It is not enough to be the voice in the wilderness and declare: "Here I am, I matter!" There has to be someone who hears and supports you. The unconditional acknowledgment of the other, who is not just different, but different in a different way and still the same in dignity, is the key concept.

Take #metoo as an example. The movement tried to overcome the challenge that women and men who have suffered sexual violence or abuse, often (and for good reason) don't feel secure enough to talk about what happened to them. Since October of 2017, #metoo has gained much support and acknowledgment. The hashtag has even been elected Time Magazine's person of the Year 2017. An unbelievable lot of people have posted their personal stories and created attention for a problem that normally isn't discussed and is kept quiet about. The sheer mass of postings has shown that sexual violence and abuse is a much bigger and more acute problem as commonly assumed. It has remedied the feelings of isolation many victims had and has gained much earned approval for this.

The reactions to #metoo (and a surprisingly large amount of postings) are not always positive and show a different problem: there are those who won't leave it to the victims to narrate their lived realities and interpret them. Relatively often the experiences of victims are belittled ("It could not have been that bad."/"Others have suffered worse than you."), negated ("You are telling lies."/"What you experienced was nothing.") or ridiculed through exaggeration ("You

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24 Functioning wheelchair accessibility is an issue. See, for example, Cara Liebowitz, *Stop Lying to Me about Accessibility*, http://thatcrazycrippledchick.blogspot.com/2017/05/stop-lying-to-me-about-accessibility.html: "Let me make something very, very clear. If you have accessible doors that you lock after a certain time, it's not accessibility. If it's 'only one step', it's not accessibility. If your solution is to carry wheelchair users down the steps, it's not accessibility. If wheelchair users are literally trapped in your restaurant until other diners finish their meal, it's not accessibility. If your accessibility is conditional, it's not accessibility."

can't complement anyone anymore without instantly being accused of sexual harassment."). The victims are not taken seriously: instead of viewing them as experts for their own stories and experiences, and giving them a platform precisely because of that, they are deliberately denied that right. Worse, they are again victimized by another kind of attacker. In these situations, more often than not, attention is demanded by the stereotypical "white straight cisgender christian man in his forties", who is used to being the one to speak in society and to have the lone interpretive power. This interpretive power starts with naming and defining the world, which has to be reconquered.[25]

All of this leaves one conclusion: the active verb "include" does not work. Indistinguishable to "integrate" it would presuppose someone who can include someone else into society. In this relationship (and grammatical sentence) someone is the passive object and someone is the active subject with the sovereignty to do all the including and excluding. This in/out binary ("we must include them") does not work. Inclusion in the literal, grammatical, perfect and passive sense of the Latin participle *inclusus/a* (as opposed to the present active root the verb "to include" is based on) is more than that, it is a state and a mindset.

The Practical Theological Side to Inclusion

The first thing that theologically comes to mind is the *basileia tou theou,* the Kingdom of God. Similar to inclusion it describes a utopia everyone is supposed to benefit from. It is a state of worldly and heavenly perfection, while inclusion could be described as societal or relational perfection. Both of them are "already begun and actually present, but somehow at the same time not finished and under construction", so they have to be thought of as already in place and, with the help of humankind, are able to call themselves into their own existence. This makes it difficult: how can we cope with the implementation of an idea we have to think of as already in place?

You could argue that inclusion is not something that concerns us and that it is an idea destined to fail and therefore not worth any effort. I would instead describe it as a part of "the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time"[26]. *Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution resulting from the Second Vatican Council, describes this in its preface. Like recognizing

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25 Mairs, *On being a Cripple*, 1-2: "First, the matter of semantics. I am a cripple. I choose this word to name me. I choose from among several possibilities, the most common of which are "handicapped" and "disabled." […] People – crippled or not – wince at the word "cripple," as they do not at "handicapped" or "disabled."[…] These words seem to me to be moving away from my condition, to be widening the gap between word and reality. Most remote is the recently coined euphemism "differently abled," which partakes of the same semantic hopefulness that transformed countries from "undeveloped" to "underdeveloped," then to "less developed," and finally to "developing" nations. People have continued to starve in those countries during the shift. Some realities do not obey the dictates of language. Mine is one of them. Whatever you call me, I remain crippled. But I don't care what you call me, so long as it isn't "differently abled," which strikes me as pure verbal garbage designed by its ability to describe anyone, to describe no one. […] Society is no readier to accept crippledness than to accept death, war, sex, sweat, or wrinkles. I would never refer to another person as a cripple. It is the word I use to name only myself."

26 *Gaudium et Spes* 1,1: *Gaudium et spes, luctus et angor hominum huius temporis, pauperum praesertim et quorumvis afflictorum, gaudium sunt et spes, luctus et angor etiam Christi discipulorum, nihilque vere humanum invenitur, quod in corde eorum non resonet. Ipsorum enim communitas ex hominibus coalescit.* [The joy and the hope, the grief and the anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the grief and the anguish of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of people. - SR]

diversity and heterogeneity, I categorize inclusion as one of the *signa temporum*, one of the signs of the times, and a *locus theologicus*, a godly and theological place we have to recognize and work on, with concrete consequences for christian practice and christian theology. This is why, for the next few passages, I will rely heavily on the work of Mai-Anh Le Tran[27], who tackles the connection of faith and violence in the world in regards to the events in Ferguson: "However, as improvisational efforts continued to rally and organize churches toward the enduring work of confronting the insidious violence of systemic social injustices in their own backyard, these [local lay and clergy] leaders ran head-on into a familiar yet perplexing wall: *the incapacity and unwillingness of their faith communities to respond with some form of faith-driven action.*"[28]

The events in Ferguson have been triggered by a spontaneous incident. They also have a systemic aspect leading up to them: exclusion is an issue that goes on silently. Discrimination is most effective when it happens unseen. Nevertheless, one would think that faith communities are at the forefront against any kind of injustices or discrimination in the world. Why is faith-driven action so difficult? And "[w]hat does it mean to be a person of faith in a violent world? What does it even mean to 'have faith' in this world that is so violent? What does it mean for vulnerable bodies – victims of systemic and systematic abuse, neglect, and indifference – to continue believing that this world exists for them, for their future, for their flourishing?"[29] Is this something we recognize and reflect enough on, that every human is *imago dei*, born in the image of God, whoever they are, which gender they have, where they are from, if they are able-bodied or not?

We sometimes forget, as Mai-Anh Le Tran analyzes, that "the lifelong and lifewide *processes* of forging, fashioning, nurturing, and exercising our faith require relational, evolving, and even revolutionary commitment to our surrounding *contexts*. We neglect the Christian tradition's long-held reverence to *phronesis* – or, as Don Browning defines it, the 'wisdom that attends to lived experience, is transformative and change-seeking and *always* interprets the lived context in the light of the values and virtues of sacred tradition.'"[30] We cannot live our faith without considering the realities of our lives, existing in a religious "bubble" that is influenced by nothing. So we have to carry our faith into our lives and spring into action and bring about change based on our changed mindset. "[But i]f God is on the side of the [oppressed] – why don't they win?"[31] Because we all are called to shape our existence in the world and that of others and work on the realization of His Kingdom. An implementation solely from "above" is unfortunately not in the cards, we have to do it.

"What if religious educators were also to imagine themselves endowed, not so much with the extraordinary prototypical charisma to singularly elevated from the rest, but rather with the charism to facilitate the ecstatic reenchantment, resacralization of lives "cut dead" by society?"[32] That would be a unique task for religious education, if we assume that inclusion is something genuinely religious and educational and maybe the biggest stepping stone towards the Kingdom

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27 Le Tran, *Reset the Heart.*
28 Ibid., 3. Emphasis in original text.
29 Ibid., 4.
30 Ibid., 6. Emphasis in original text. Contains the citation of Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology. Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis, MN 1991), 47.
31 Walton, *Writing Methods*, 150.
32 Le Tran, *Reset the Heart*, 9. Emphasis in original text.

of God. To facilitate that, we have to look anew on how we conduct practical theological research and how we can perceive reality.

An Inclusive Epistemology

I first encountered Heather Walton's method of reflective theological writing[33] in Mai-Anh Le Tran's book. It brought me to the idea that for inclusion to work, you have to make room for narratives, let the stories of people (and the people themselves) be present, and welcome their subjectiveness. Heather Walton calls this a reflexive approach.

"A major contribution to this reflexive approach has come from the development of feminist theory over the past half-century. One of the founding principles of feminism is that the world looks different according to the place from which it is viewed. […] Sandra Harding (1991), for example, advocates an approach to objectivity that does not assume a neutral perspective. She argues that those most painfully affected by an issue gain a privileged understanding of its parameters – she who wears the shoe best understands how it pinches!"[34] This is not only true for women's perspectives, but also for every issue a society can encounter: there is always a group of people more affected we should listen to. We often forget to ask ourselves if an issue really concerns us and who the experts of the situation are, and stop ourselves talking over them. We should value their expertise.

Heather Waltons method corresponds with the extra step Reinhold Boschki introduced to expand the epistemological three-step method in practical theology and religious education, (see – judge – act). He states that this step of orientation is exceptionally important, as it gets the point across that religious education cannot rightfully claim to talk about reality objectively. Instead, we have to very carefully and deliberately lay open the subjectiveness behind it all, behind every content, structure or connection we produce. After this additional but vital step, you can then see, judge and act accordingly.[35]

With this change in method, he puts reflexivity into a structured practical theological use: "It [the concept of reflexivity – SR] is an important concept within current debates about epistemology (ways of knowing), where it is used to highlight the role that the self plays in the generation of all forms of knowledge about the world. It is now widely acknowledged that the knower is not related to knowledge as a coherent bounded subject to a separate object. A much more complex interplay takes place between the observer and the observed that changes both of them and challenges views of reasoning as a process of rational and unbiased observation. […] However, this experiential knowledge should be tried and tested through dialogue with others who view the same problem from a different location. Through such dialogical processes a 'stronger' objectivity emerges which in turn can inform action – action that is both appropriate and transforming."[36] For inclusion, this means that those people get to speak, and speak first, who are affected the most by an issue. It also means that the rest of the community is supposed to listen properly before responding, and respect the fact that the voice of the affected takes precedent over their own. It is about respect owed and respect given, but also about locating yourself and your unique perspective in your research.

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33 Walton, *Writing Methods*.
34 Ibid., xvii.
35 Reinhold Boschki, *Einführung in die Religionspädagogik*, Darmstadt 2017, 84.
36 Walton, *Writing Methods*, xvi-xvii.

"Even researchers who have a realist understanding of the social world and are seeking "hard evidence" to support their theoretical perspectives now frequently "locate" themselves within their research findings as a widely recognized mark of good practice."[37] This is what Boschki tried to broaden the method with – locating yourself, your unique perspective on things, that changes your understanding of reality and truth as a researcher, by incorporating it as a fundamental step in the epistemological method – as the first and most important step, as it changes the outcome of all others and gives account about what influences them.

Our modern way to do research frequently overlooks this important step. You can even guess this by the language used in publications. An objective truth is suggested by using predicates in passive forms instead of using active ones, by avoiding the first and second person or verbs that express emotion or doubt. Researchers who instead accept, like Boschki would argue, that religious education (and the epistemology of religious education) happens in the area of intersection between mediation (contents), appropriation (subjects and their experiences) and communication (relationships)[38] cannot just look at the contents and ignore the subjects and the communicational processes in their work. In other words: they have to convey their underlying positions, thoughts, and premises, as well as their results. Even more so if they write about a topic like inclusion.

Inclusion can become a reality, but only if everyone has a right to their experiences and their own interpretation, a right to their own narrative and life stories and their own insights and conclusions.

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37 Ibid., xvii.
38 See Boschki, *Einführung*, 103.